

Chap Book

Published by the
COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION
BROOKLYN COLLEGE

Brooklyn, N. Y.

March, 1948

The Survival-Quotient in

Teaching Literature

By

PAUL LANDIS

University of Illinois

Duke University Library

MAY 6 1948

Durham, N. C.

THE teaching of literature in my title refers exclusively to undergraduate teaching, and the matter I propose to talk about is what and how much of that teaching survives in those who have been exposed to it. The significance of the pseudoscientific term—for which I know no authority in any jargon—will, I hope, become clear as I proceed, for it is meant to convey some sense of the confusion of values out of which the questions arise and to foreshadow the nature of my answers.

By undergraduate teaching I mean teaching of non-professional students, the great body of our students who will never become editors or writers or even teachers of literature, who will never use our instruction professionally. Not that there is no question there. I have known teachers of literature who taught practically everything else and whose literary culture seemed to have gone with the wind of the Ph.D. Thesis. But they present a different problem, a problem for the teachers of teachers of English, and though I engage with some enthusiasm in that form of selfpropagation, I don't like to think too much about it. It develops an uncomfortable feeling of having got my tail stuck in my mouth. Most of the work of any teacher of

literature is done with students who, for reasons not always clearly perceived, have been convinced that literature is an important part of their education no matter what they are going to do. Semester after semester they leave the university to go into business or to marry, to ride suburban trains to and from offices where they are concerned with inventories and sales and market reports, to dust and wash dishes and raise children, to become lawyers and doctors and airplane hostesses and citizens. Their working hours will be spent in specialized activity and what time is left will be largely taken up by the details of living with people just like themselves in a very small community. They will read some, but not very much. It is hard for us to realize it, but they will have more important things to do. And when in later years we look on those whom we nourished on Shakespeare and Wordsworth and Henry James, our disillusion is matched only by that of our colleagues in physical education when they survey the bulging figures and sagging muscles of those whom for a little time they had raised to physical tautness. It is no wonder that we ask ourselves what our work comes to, what remains of all the effort expended by teacher and student on literature. We would do well to take a leaf from physical education, for it is not on record that the muscle boys ever for a minute questioned the value of their wares or that they suggested turning their courses in gym into Ethics or American Democracy. Yet the survival-quotient is infinitely more measureable in their work than in ours.

In fact, in a very real sense, we condemn ourselves by asking the question. There is a basic validity in the medieval belief that

"there is knowledge God forbid
More than man should own."

There are questions which should never be asked, not because they cannot be answered, but because he who asks the question indicates by it that he has lost the capacity to answer. Othello's tragedy is sealed by his question, "Why did I marry?" The answer to that question was plain as sunlight to him until he asked it, and once he asked it no light on earth was bright enough to pierce its mystery. When the answer requires faith, the question is likely to be fatal, and the teaching of literature—of the humanities in general—is a persistent act of faith. To question too seriously why we teach it or to seek to measure its value indicates a certain loss of faith and a

deluded confidence that the answer is attainable by other means. I should have no truck with these questions were it not for the fact that they are being asked and answered in ways that depress us at our work and seduce us from our mission. The suggestion of mathematical exactness in the term "survival-quotient" is meant to indicate that we are being forced to measure the incommensurable, to establish limited objectives for a limitless activity, to fix a price on that which has only value. It is time we told Alexander to get out of our sunlight.

The conqueror of our times is the "expert" and many of us sit shivering in his shadow. I have no more quarrel with the expert than Diogenes had with Alexander. For better or for worse our age requires experts. The rapid multiplication of fields of knowledge and the intensity of their cultivation have made us dependent upon specialists to produce and maintain the means of daily living. The need for experts in our complex world is obvious, but "expertism" is our besetting sin, for it entails the assumption that all problems are solvable, that every aspiration and activity of the human spirit can and should have a specific aim, that this aim is attainable, and that the value of everything is commensurate with its use in that specific attainment. It says to teachers of non-professional subjects: either decide on a specific and attainable objective for your stuff or stop taking up the students' time teaching them things they can never use. We teachers of literature can no more escape the zeitgeist than any of our contemporaries, but, in the nature of things, it is for us more of a haunting ghost than an informing spirit. We are seduced by it into devious paths, into teaching literature for the sake of citizenship, Americanism, democracy or to learn how to get along with our neighbors. Those of us who stick more grimly to our subject come off no better. We tell ourselves and the world that we are teaching literature to acquaint our students with the best books or that we are developing "taste." Each one of these aims is laudable in itself, but the minute any one of them becomes our conscious objective the result is depressing. For then one is conscious only of one of two things: how far he has fallen short of his destination or how insipid the place is when he gets there. If one is really travelling, every moment has its point. But, if one is going to Buffalo, even Cleveland won't do, and when one gets to Buffalo, it's scarcely worth the trouble.

I shall not say much about the social objectives, for in their pur-

suit, the "survival-quotient" is unimportant. The literature was thrown out at the start of the trip. We cannot make literature the handmaid of democracy, capitalism, communism, Americanism or even good citizenship without debasing her beyond recognition. But here the danger is doubled, for even the objective becomes distorted. What kind of democracy is that which can be taught? We are at present engaged in the enormous business of teaching democracy throughout the world with no conspicuously happy results. A little reflection should show us that no people on earth ever achieved democracy or got it back by being taught it. The very essence of it is the realization that there are good men who are not democrats. And citizenship, which sounds like such a lofty ideal, dissolves under our scrutiny. It means so many things, like doing one's jury service, keeping litter off the streets, obeying the laws and seeing that every one else does. It also means betraying your guest to the F. B. I. and turning over your neighbor or your father when he breaks the law. The simple fact is that a man is much more than a citizen as Prince Hal recognized when he saw Falstaff, as he thought, dead on the field of Shrewsbury and regretfully remarked: "I better could have spared a better man."

It is with the more purely literary aims, the knowledge of literature and the development of "Taste," that the question of what survives from our teaching forces itself upon us. Here at least we can measure our achievement. And the result is not encouraging. "Whether there be knowledge," we have been assured by St. Paul, "it shall vanish away." But we are not prepared to see it vanish so far so soon. As for taste, the slip is even more disappointing. We teach them Jane Austen and Thackeray and Shakespeare, and after they leave us they read *The Post* and murder stories. Obviously, by the criterion of taste, the survival-quotient of our teaching is low.

Now, much as I deplore certain aspects of this situation, I believe that our discouragement in it rests upon two false premises: 1, that one can measure what a student got from his courses in literature by what he reads after college, and 2, that the power and willingness to choose a "good" book is an important objective for the teaching of literature. I am on dangerous ground here, and I would not be misunderstood. I know that some books are better than others, and I should like to feel that my efforts as a teacher contributed to my students' choosing the best, but I am convinced that *how* one reads is vastly more important than *what* he reads, and that

the business of judging a book as good or bad bears about the same relation to reading as the game of bridge bears to living. They're good clean fun, but of no great significance. "A wise man," says Milton, "like a good refiner, can gather gold out of the drossiest volume . . . and will make better use of an idle pamphlet, than a fool will do of sacred Scripture." One of the few things we can be certain of about Shakespeare is that he read murder stories, for he gave them back to us as Othello, Macbeth, and Hamlet. Now I know that few of our renegades will refine such gold, but neither would they if they had read Shakespeare himself. The difference, as Milton emphasized, is not in the books read, but in the readers—in the man. It is the man who is the proper objective of all non-professional teaching, and of such teaching, literature has from the beginning been the heart.

But this means that we must look for the significant survival of our efforts in much besides the literary life of those whom we have taught. We cannot accept as its true index their failure to locate the "gems of wisdom" on quiz programs or the books that lie on their living-room tables. The place where our work survives, if it survives at all, is in the individual character of those who have passed through our classrooms, and it operates chiefly in those little, nameless, unremembered acts that make up the most of life. We cannot see that it is there, but we must believe that it is. No test can be devised which will isolate our contribution to the whole personality, and no survival-quotient can be struck.

Therefore we, as teachers of literature, must not be seduced by personal pride or by experts in educational efficiency into treating literature as a field of knowledge.

There is today a widespread movement to improve education by dividing our offerings into "fields of knowledge." Because we believe in equality when we can't get priority, and because the easy symbol of equality is arithmetical, we see to it that the student does an equal stint in each of the four fields: Physical Knowledge, Biological Knowledge, Social Knowledge, and Humanity (sic) Knowledge. It's hard to keep the fences in repair, but we can set up guards wherever there is a panel that won't stay up.

I have deliberately avoided the word *science* because it is a controversial word which to some conjures up the hope of the world and to others stands for the devil to which all our ills are due. I would not for a moment be misunderstood on that score. I bear no animus

against science, and I am especially anxious not to stir any. Therefore I have chosen its simple and unequivocal patronym, *Knowledge*. No one is against knowledge (whatever some may think of fact-finding boards). One may bear painful memories of the labor of getting it—unsightly callouses and old twinges in the mental sacroiliac from having wrestled with a root too deeply grown to be extracted; but these are honorable injuries suffered in a noble cause. Knowledge is like virtue; everyone is for it as everyone, including Coolidge's parson, is against sin. But it is also a plain and naked word. Unlike *science*, *knowledge* has not been to the beauty parlor, it wears no makeup, no attractive uniform. Everyone knows her for what she is, and therefore, you winced at the absurd phrase Humanity Knowledge. Biological knowledge, Physical Knowledge — these are recognizable and valued friends. We see more family resemblance between them than we used to, but we can still tell them apart except in the twilight. Social knowledge sounds a little strange—the face is familiar but the name is not quite right. She looks vaguely like what we used to know as history, but she's wearing the threadbare suit and dismal hairdo of economics and that wild light in her eyes which we used to recognize as politics, is obscured by the tinted glasses of Utopianism. But the unrecognizable monstrosity is Humanity Knowledge. Humanistic Knowledge is cleaner grammatically, but no more intelligible or attractive; and if we substitute for *Humanity* or *Humanistic* the word which embodies educationally the soul of the concept, Literature, we realize that in Literary Knowledge we see a corpse from which the soul has fled. I have gradually, it seems, transfigured our favorite academic figure of "fields of knowledge" into four somewhat unattractive muses. If we return now to the delving student and watch him sweating in that field of knowledge called Literature, we recognize the pathos of his effort. It is not that his labor goes unrewarded, but that the reward is so incommensurate with the effort. His field is overgrown with wild flowers which have a way of withering under cultivation. With methods taken from his work in other fields he can try to classify them, but they won't stay put; he can count their endless mutations, but when he deliberately crosses them to breed for some special characteristic, the seed is always sterile. He would enjoy, like Ferdinand, to sit under the cork tree and smell the flowers, but that is no way to till a field of knowledge, and he must bring goods to market at examination time. So he digs up the sweet grass, and

sometimes turns up a delicate but unnourishing truffle, seldom anything so satisfactory as a potato. Sometimes his spade hits against a hard metallic boulder that once was a star, but what can you do with a star you dig up except put it in a museum?

Here lies our chief danger as teachers of literature. Everything draws us away from the book — biography, history, literary influences, style, criticism, all these are easier to teach than literature itself, and each has its legitimate place. But our paramount business is to make the book a living experience. Nothing of the author's life is of the slightest significance except as it illumines the book. Literary history is a chancy thing at best, and at most a minor chapter — for all its glory — in the chronicle of the race. To disentangle the threads of Renaissance philosophies in *The Fairie Queene* or to track its even more complex allegory through Elizabethan fears and prejudices is a pleasant and refined game for the literary sophisticate, but it is worse than trivial for the students we are trying to reach with literature if it is allowed for a minute to obscure the gorgeous colors, the endless magic of invention, the flash of phrase, and "the linked sweetness long drawn out", not of the verse only, but of the star-struck spirit of Edmund Spenser. But it is hard to ask questions about these things, and when one tills a field one must reap crops.

For some of us it is great fun to take a book apart, but even we must realize that it is more important to take it to heart. It is better to read a poor book vividly than a good one coldly; and I should rather develop in my students Sir Walter Scott's power to read a dull novel with delight than cultivate in them Mr. Cleanth Brook's capacity to analyze *The Grecian Urn*. It doesn't matter much what the mind takes hold of in the poem if the poem produces no catch in the throat.

The hardest thing we have to do—and the one most worth doing—is to get students to experience a book — to surrender their pride and their prejudice, their fear of their own inability and of our questions, to subdue their desire to seek what they ought to get to the thrill of satisfaction at what they find. If we can get them to do that, they will not only be more fond of good books, they will derive more from all books. But what they derive will be as little apparent as the vitamins they ate for breakfast—and even more vitalizing.

No, literature among the fields of knowledge is incongruous. I

would not be understood to scorn knowledge of literature. As I said earlier, knowledge is a good thing, and we are all for it. I mean only to insist that knowledge is the least important thing about literature, and that for the purpose of educating men and women knowledge of literature is of infinitely less importance than knowledge of plants and beetles and diet and atomic structure. Literary knowledge is a luxury, and few men live long enough or freely enough to indulge heavily in it; certainly among the millions we are trying to educate their number is negligible.

But as we all know, education is more than gathering knowledge. Our faith in knowledge has lately had a rude awakening. We have realized for a long time that our knowledge was outdistancing our capacity to utilize it, that our very enlightenment was reducing us steadily to the state of the Bandar-Log. But it was a long process and there seemed always hope that we might catch up. All that changed when it was demonstrated that at one small but significant point man's knowledge had penetrated to the heart of things. The stupendous significance of the atomic bomb was the revelation that man, in his search for knowledge, had discovered power — not water power or electric power or steam power — but the thing itself, and had demonstrated that he could use it. Paradoxically, that blinding light over Hiroshima showed not the glory of knowledge but the lonely figure of one man — Everyman—Anyman—the “Man against the sky”, “Like the last god going home unto his last desire.” All the knowledge gathered in all the centuries since Renaissance man stepped out of the Middle Ages had shown in one blinding flash that the only significant thing on earth is a human individual. And we are worried now about saving this man from his own knowledge. Why is he worth saving? Certainly not for the sake of knowledge or of truth. For all knowledge and truth are meaningless without that man dozing there in his galluses and slippers after supper. He is the ultimate value, and he is a being with the capacity to love and be loved, to fear and hate and be gay, to mourn and to take delight. To him the sun is more than warmth and the birdsong more than conditioned vibrations because he has a limitless capacity to respond to life.

That capacity it is the business of general education, whatever else it does, to expand and develop, not into a chemist or a critic or a college professor—those are accidental sidelines—but into a full man. For it is only the character that gives point to knowledge.

Out of his responses to life man has developed concepts—we call them ideals because they are truths beyond knowledge, and literature is their repository. Literature is a world wherein man can see clearly that life which is so often obscured in this world by the business of living. It is a world not pieced together by knowledge, but created by the spirit of man, where the forest of Arden is as real as the Boar's Head Tavern and Doll Tearsheet is as right as Rosalind. You don't learn about that world, you live in it, become familiar with it, and you can say of your experience as Goethe did of Winckelmann: "One learns nothing from him, but one becomes something."

Not long ago a colleague said to me, not without malice! "Seniors laugh at how little they know about Shakespeare. They took it, they say, and enjoyed it, but they don't remember much about it." The comment was meant as a criticism of our system and method of education—of our laxity in admitting almost anyone to the study of Shakespeare and of the futility of our instruction. But it touched me in a very delicate spot. Nevertheless, I found that my reaction was neither to rise to the defense of my instruction, nor to lament the hours spent in casting pearls, nor to berate the callous and unscholarly attitude of the seniors. Even the laughter seemed to me less humanly reprehensible than the more flattering regret would have been. Seniors are young, and regret is sure to come. But even when regret does come, it is a feeling the experience of which is more salutary than the expression. What I found myself attacking was the premise upon which the criticism was based, a premise which underlies much of the criticism of our education, and which vitiates much of our teaching, especially in the humanities. The premise that the value and effectiveness of education can be measured, either by outside agency or by the individual himself by appeal to conscious memory.

Now, I will not go so far as to say that it is better to forget than to remember. I am old enough to regret and entirely too old to be surprised at the faithlessness of memory. My young critic was indeed not much older than the seniors he quoted, not old enough perhaps to be aware of the facility with which the memory drops not only Shakespeare and the formulas of trigonometry and the distinction between Descartes and Hume, but the name of the family who last year lived next door and what the quarrel was about that time the heart broke on midsummer eve 1926—or was it '28? Certainly he, like many critics of education, did not realize that this habit of

the mind is not only not altogether bad, but in some respects downright serviceable and enlightening. The experience of sorrow is more significant than the specific cause, which is often silly and usually irrational; the family next door does not move out of one's life with its name. The experience remains in a hundred ways, buried amid that mass of understanding of men which we so laboriously accumulate. "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," and the realization of that wisdom is in no way dependent on remembering that Juliet spoke the line in the balcony scene.

Because so many educators and teachers show by their criticism and their faith in the machinery of tests and measurements that they do not understand this, it seems worth while to emphasize now and then that in the realm of the humanities (1) it is more important to have known than to remember; (2) it is often only after knowledge has receded from the conscious memory that it becomes significant or even serviceable; and (3) that no one, least of all the individual in question, can accurately measure what he has "got" from a poet or a philosopher, a course in Latin, a Victorian novel, or a semester in the middle ages.

It has been only since liberal scholarship lost its amateur standing that to remember has come to be more important than to have known. The distinguishing mark of the professional scholar is that he can cite the source of every fact and idea which he dares to use. He may, and often does, display other and more attractive qualities of mind, but that which sets him apart as a "professional" among educated men is the ability to tag every picture, locate every line, and cite for every idea the source, preferably obscure, from which it sprang. There is nothing reprehensible in this, and the knowledge which the professional scholar accumulates is, like all knowledge, of inestimable value — inestimable, because no one can ever guess in what mind what detail will find the soil in which it can take root and burst into living green. No one who has made the acquaintance of Socrates would willingly give him up, but surely it is a distortion of values to hold that it is more important to cite Socrates than to "know thyself." Of what significance is the listing of seventeen literary sources for *The West Wind* compared with the realization of that spirit "tameless and swift and proud?" Those sources may be valid, but if Shelley had remembered them, he never could have written the poem; and until the poem was written they were as superfluous as the hair he shaved from his chin. They had to sink

into the limbo of forgotten things before they could spring to life at the touch of the wild west wind. It is good to think Plato's noble thoughts with Plato and to know that he is at your elbow, but surely the name is less important than the spirit of free speculation, and what harm can come to you or Plato if you think his thoughts as yours? Hazlitt was a better scholar than most of those who locate and correct his quotations, for the resources of his mind rose spontaneously to form and support his attitudes, and if they generally wore Hazlitt's livery instead of their original master's, that is the true communism of the mind. That is the attitude of the amateur scholar. For by amateur I do not mean the careless and slipshod, but the true lover; and the refrain of the true lover has always been:

My true love hath my heart and I have his.

He does not use what he loves; he becomes it, and it is he. "Whatever acts upon you," wrote Elizabeth Barrett, "becomes *you*—and whatever you love or hate, whatever charms you or is scorned by you, acts on you and becomes *you*."

In fact it is only when knowledge has become a part of one, when it has receded from the conscious mind to join the very roots of nature, so that it can emerge unsummoned to enrich and interpret experience—it is only then that it becomes transmutable into human values. That only nourishes which is assimilated, and that which has been assimilated has lost its identity. Ariel's song to Ferdinand is the history of all assimilated knowledge.

Full fadom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

Some sea-change occurs inevitably in every mind. Happy the one in which the bones and jellies of knowledge are transmuted into jewels.

Well-meaning citizens are attempting to make good Americans by means of a statute requiring every student to take a course in American history. It is good to know American history because it is good not to be ignorant and because it is especially good to know oneself. But if the knowledge so gained is to make good Americans, it must go beyond knowledge to the roots of being and arise as the

spirit of free but faulty men dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Only that knowledge which goes too deep to be recalled at will is capable of serving without summons. It is the virtue of liberal scholarship, as it is of tradition, that it operates constantly and of its own volition, like the conscience of the educated mind.

So it is that no one can ever measure what he, or anyone else got from a book or a course, and to try to do so is to distort the value of liberal scholarship. The question, what do I get from it? comes from the stomach, not the soul. So I am not worried nearly so much about the seniors who have forgotten their Shakespeare as I am by those teachers of literature who take their statement seriously. Certainly the students have forgotten the sources of *The Merchant of Venice*; they are not sure whether Dogberry is in *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Much Ado* — or maybe it grows on Prospero's island for Caliban to pick. What of that? Shakespeare knew they would when he made Fluellen speak of "the fat knight with the great-belly doublet—I have forgot his name." The names go, but the fat knight and the troubled son of Denmark and the humbled old king of Britain remain unnoticed to serve, not on call, but at need, like Barbara, whose half-forgotten willow song on one particular night would not go from Desdemona's mind. For books do not go into the mind whole, their covers stiff about them—that is the way they go into a library. In the mind the binding dissolves, the table of contents fades away, the characters wander freely about like Antony and Cleopatra among the ghosts, and ideas merge with each other and lose their identity like summer clouds above a lake. Dean Swift was not distinguished for his confidence in the human mind, yet he wrote what is at once the most perfect and most hopeful statement of the value of books and the nature of liberal knowledge: "If a rational man reads an excellent author with just application, he will find himself extremely improved, and perhaps insensibly led to imitate that author's perfection, although in a little time he should not remember one word in the book, nor even the subject it handled; for books give the same turn to our thoughts and way of reasoning that good and ill company do to our behavior and conversation; without either loading our memories or making us even sensible of the change."

